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J. Robinson, *Ordinary cities : Between Modernity and Development.*

London, Routledge, 2006, xiv + 204 p.

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1 Jennifer Robinson's "Ordinary Cities" delivers a powerful critique of the spatial division of academic theorization. Her central thesis is that urban theory development has been hampered for too long by the assumed dichotomy between innovative "global cities" in rich countries and imitative "third world" cities in poor countries. It is Robinson's contention that theoretical insights cannot be based on the experiences of a few wealthy cities only, and that a post-colonial field of urban studies should assume the potential for learning in a broad range of different settings. For this reason, she envisages an urban theory that does not rest on pre-given categories of cities but on a cosmopolitan comparativism that places all cities within the same analytical field. Within this field, the differences across and within cities must be thought of as diversity rather than exemplars of a hierarchical division. In order to learn from different contexts, Robinson argues, it is not global cities or third world cities that should be central to academic analysis and policy recommendations, but what she calls "ordinary" cities, in all their complexity, diversity and peculiarity.

2 To substantiate this claim, Robinson begins with a critical rethinking of the concepts of modernity and development in urban studies. In the first chapter, she challenges Park's and Wirth's parochial and ethnocentric understandings of the Western city as the cradle of civilization and modernity as opposed to the primitivity and traditionality of the countryside and cities in other countries. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's work, she shows that modernity and tradition are mutually interdependent and that what has

been perceived as primitivity is an essential part of urban life all over the world. The second chapter deepens this critique by juxtaposing the accounts of the Chicago School with mid-twentieth-century studies on comparative urbanism in the Zambian Copper Belt. While Park and Wirth described the big cities of America as sites of alienation, individualism and indifference, members of the Manchester School considered the industrialised and multicultural cities of the Copper Belt to be places full of interaction associated with urban modernity through cultural practices that had previously been considered outside the realms of urban life. In the third chapter, Robinson further seeks to shatter the conventional illusions of modernity by arguing that so-called Western modernities are almost always hybridisations and that urban innovation is generally a result of cosmopolitan interdependence. She illustrates this tension between discourse and reality with the fact that critics look to New York as the trendsetting city in the field of urban architecture, while many so-called modern innovations actually originated in Renaissance Italy, Aztec Mexico or Rio de Janeiro.

3 In the remainder of her book, Robinson examines the implications of her critical rethinking of the idea of modernity for academic theorization and policy development. First, Robinson criticises the world cities literature for putting the emphasis on a relative small sector of the global economy and for dropping most cities in the world from its vision. Because of the focus on advanced business and producer services, cities like Lusaka or Kuala Lumpur largely fall off the world cities map, despite the fact that they are tied to the rest of the world through a wide range of economic activities such as the trade in second hand clothing or Islamic forms of global activity. As the world cities literature reproduces hierarchical relations amongst cities where some urban places are defined as modern and others as in need of development, it is not only a problematic framework for theorization on cities, however, but also for policy development. Robinson elaborates this argument in the fifth chapter through a detailed analysis of the Johannesburg 2030 vision for the city. In order to secure economic growth and improved service delivery in Johannesburg, Robinson claims that a "city development strategy" has to start from a city-wide view of urban features that takes the diversity of needs and activities in poor and wealthy parts of the city seriously. For this reason, Robinson calls, in the last chapter, for theoretical repertoires that are appreciative of the diversity of cities. These have to focus on the close intertwining of social welfare and economic activities in both poor and rich cities by acknowledging that all cities are assembling and inventing diverse ways of being modern.

4 In the post-colonial urbanism Robinson sets out in Ordinary Cities, a cosmopolitan and comparative theoretical endeavour will enrich the divided form of urban studies. This means that policy makers and academics in Western cities have to question their understandings of cultural and economic aspects of city life by revisiting them through the lens of poor cities, and vice versa. This idea does not imply, however, that well-resourced scholars should start globe-trotting to study cities around the world. Robinson pleads, on the contrary, for the kind of armchair comparativism that forces scholars to think comparatively. In her own words (p. 168), she suggests "that any research on cities needs to be undertaken in a spirit of attentiveness to the possibility that cities elsewhere might perhaps be different and shed stronger light on the processes being studied. The potential to learn from other contexts, other cities, would need to always be kept open and hopefully acted upon".

5 While Robinson's provocative thesis definitely breaks down the binary thinking that has shaped the way in which cities have been classified and studied, it is surprising that all her attention goes to the deconstruction of the dichotomy between the West and the rest. By focusing her effort on the hierarchical categorisation of all cities as developed or undeveloped, Robinson implicitly reproduces the marginal position that non-English and non-American Western geographers take up in the international production of urban theory. Belgian geographers, for example, clearly belong to the side of the West in Robinson's analysis. Nevertheless, it is one of their frustrations that theorizations about Belgian cities will never be taken seriously by the urban studies academics in the United States or Britain. Very rarely, a scholar from the Anglo-Saxon heartland would be expected to cite a Belgian case study for the sake of the originality of the theory, and not just to embellish his list of references with a publication from an exotic country imitating and confirming the theories produced in London, Los Angeles or New York. In addition, it must be noted that the examples Robinson elaborates, originate largely in big cities. The silencing of smaller cities, towns, villages and other settlement forms is problematic because it seems to reinforce the modernist notion criticised in the first chapter of the book that innovations take place in cities and that other areas are, by definition, traditional, primitive and undynamic. By breaking down the binary between urban and rural geographies, and by bridging the divide between Anglo-Saxon and Continental urban theories, I believe it is possible to fully envisage the scope of Jennifer Robinson's powerful and inspiring arguments.